Writing Woodstock: The Prehistory of *Richard II* and Shakespeare's Dramatic Method

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In 1971, A. L. French suggested that “the murder of Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, is a central issue” to the understanding of *Richard II*.¹ While French’s claim is undoubtedly correct, there has yet to be, four decades later, a fully satisfactory account of Woodstock’s precise dramatic operation in *Richard II*, or of Shakespeare’s notoriously opaque treatment of Woodstock’s equally notorious death. This essay is an attempt to clarify these matters. Scholars have routinely regarded *Richard II* as a play that anticipates the future calamity of English history—and it indeed does look forward to the long, bloody aftermath of Richard’s deposition. In this essay, however, I will argue that the role of Woodstock in *Richard II* functions inversely, drawing its dramatic power from historical events that precede the play itself—the intricate web of political intrigue that culminated in the duke’s murder.² In both the me-

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1. A. L. French, “*Richard II* and the Woodstock Murder,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1971): 337–44, at 337. For the purposes of this essay, I will refer not to the Duke of Gloucester but to Woodstock, his more recognizable name.

2. Of course, the play’s general attitude toward history has been a long, hotly debated critical crux. For two recent discussions of the play’s (multiple) historical perspectives, see Derek Cohen, “History and the Nation in *Richard II* and *Henry IV*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 42, no. 2 (2002): 293–315; and Zenón Luis-Martínez, “Shakespeare’s Historical Drama as *Trauerspiel*: *Richard II*—and After,” *ELH* 75, no. 3 (2008): 673–705. See also H. R. Coursen, “Theories of History in *Richard II*,” *Upstart Crow* 8 (1988): 42–53; Paul Budra, “Writing the Tragic Self: *Richard II*’s Sad Stories,” *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 18, no. 4 (1994): 5–15; and, more generally, Tracey Hill, “‘Since Forged Invention Former Time

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dieval and early modern historical tradition—and thus in the sources that inspired *Richard II*—Woodstock's death was not a discrete event but rather the culmination of a factional struggle that had gripped England for over a decade. I suggest that this antecedent history, despite being unstaged, nonetheless helps shape the opening acts of *Richard II*: what I will call the “prehistory” of Woodstock's death elucidates matters of local confusion and illuminates Shakespeare's broader compositional strategy in the play.

I. WHY PREHISTORY?

The murder of Thomas Woodstock has long troubled readers of *Richard II*. The confusion it introduces is integral to the play's opening act, but the sequence is soaked in ambiguity and obscurity, and Shakespeare's specific handling of the material prompts a series of questions: what exactly is King Richard's role in his uncle's death? What is his motive for the murder? And how, precisely, does Woodstock's fate relate to the feud of Mowbray and Bolingbroke, itself of uncertain (and, as reported, somewhat bizarre) origins? The play provides no good answer to these queries, and scholars have variously accounted for Shakespeare's apparent narrative neglect—by positing, for example, audience familiarity with the related play *Thomas of Woodstock*, or with the events of medieval history more generally.³ But while critics once found fault with such unwieldy obscurity, today's readers have been more willing to see it as a calculated part of Shakespeare's dramaturgy: Charles R. Forker, for example, has recently argued that Shakespeare “wished for dramatic reasons to becloud not only the physical but also the ethical circumstances of Gloucester's

Defaced”: Representing Tudor History in the 1590s,” in *The Anatomy of Tudor Literature*, ed. Mike Pincombe (Burlington: Ashgate, 2001), 195–210.

3. Long ago, A. P. Rossiter made a case for contiguity in his edition of *Woodstock* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946). I am not convinced, however, that Shakespeare would make such demands of his viewers, and a host of dramatic inconsistencies complicate any easy relationship between the two plays. It is also important to note that *Woodstock* has a quite flexible relationship with the historical record and could not have provided Shakespeare with the prehistory I will describe below; see *ibid.*, 21–23. I am equally unconvinced by claims that Shakespeare wrote *Woodstock*—but this too is tangential to my current discussion, as *Richard II* and *Woodstock* clearly belong to two different dramatic universes. The case for Shakespeare's authorship has been made most forcefully by Michael Egan in *The Tragedy of Richard II, Part One: A Newly Authenticated Play by William Shakespeare*, 4 vols. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2006) and “Woodstock's Golden Metamorphosis,” *Shakespeare Yearbook* 16 (2007): 75–115; MacDonald P. Jackson, however, argues a powerful case for Samuel Rowley in “Shakespeare's *Richard II* and the Anonymous *Thomas of Woodstock*,” *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 14 (2001): 17–65, and “The Date and Authorship of *Thomas of Woodstock*: Evidence and Its Interpretation,” *Research Opportunities in Medieval and Renaissance Drama* 46 (2007): 67–100.

death” and that act 1’s ambiguities thus “constitute a deliberate dramatic strategy” on the playwright’s part.⁴

While I agree with Forker’s claims, I am not yet satisfied that we have exhausted our account of how such obscurity serves Shakespeare’s dramatic aims. On one hand, the oblique report of Woodstock’s death (and the thematic atmosphere it introduces) emerges organically from the opening act’s narrative and thematic context: there is dramatic advantage to shrouding Richard’s moral character, and the attending lords are hardly in a position to denounce his crimes openly. Yet, on the other hand, such explanations do not account for the common critical response cited above: there is indeed something peculiar about Shakespeare’s withholdings here, a substantial lacuna that challenges our reading of the play and vexes our critical expectations of his dramaturgy. For this reason, the opaque treatment of Woodstock’s death demands further elaboration—and to expand our account of its operation, we must widen our contextual net to consider its origins more precisely. Although Shakespeare’s handling of this sequence contains an internal dramatic consistency, I believe that it owes largely to a set of external forces: the *longer* history of Woodstock’s rise and fall, before the events of Shakespeare’s play, as it was recorded by early modern historians and poets.

This essay attempts to account for how *Richard II* is informed by this narrative “prehistory”: my name for the sequence of events that, in the early modern historical tradition, is said to have preceded the play’s opening scene—and that Shakespeare would have accordingly encountered in the sources that underwrite it. The murder of Woodstock is an initiatory act in Shakespeare’s *Richard II*; anchored at the heart of the Mowbray/Bolingbroke feud, it helps trip the theatrical process that culminates in the tragedy of King Richard and the triumph of King Henry. But in both Renaissance and modern historical accounts, the events that begin Shakespeare’s play are also notable for their terminal force: Woodstock’s death is thought to conclude a set of political events that had complicated King Richard’s rule for over a decade. It is my contention that Shakespeare was likely aware of this prehistory, even if he had not read deeply into the early part of Richard’s reign: as we will see, the sources he did consult insist thoroughly on this context for Woodstock’s death, which would have become apparent after even only a cursory look into the facts of the notorious murder.

4. See Charles R. Forker, ed., *Richard II*, Arden Shakespeare, 3rd. ser. (London: Thompson Learning, 2002), 191n, 186n. (All quotations from the play refer to this edition.) As French notes, it has been routinely argued that “Shakespeare’s handling of the matter, and his allotment of guilt, was rather too obscure for his purposes” (“Woodstock Murder,” 337), and such critical heavyweights as Tillyard have questioned Shakespeare’s motives.

More specifically, I argue that Woodstock's death posed a complex dramaturgical challenge for Shakespeare. As he knew from his sources, a full account of the murder—the event anchored at the emotional center of the play's opening act—could not be conveyed without a diffuse, unnecessary regression into the long history of King Richard's reign. In response to this challenge, I suggest, Shakespeare embeds the terms of his compositional dilemma in the play itself by enshrouding its opening scenes with an atmosphere of silence and paranoia and by insisting on the impossibility of speaking truthfully about Woodstock in Richard's (open) court: a dramatically and thematically appropriate decision that, more importantly, also alleviates the burden of explicating Woodstock's fall. The play's vagueness about Woodstock reveals how Shakespeare chose to bridle a particularly unruly historical record—a rhetorical decision that, we will see, activated a compensatory thematic agenda, insofar as the playwright extracts several key motifs from the repressed narrative and embeds them in the events that *are* staged. Shakespeare, it seems to me, consciously writes Woodstock's prehistory into *Richard II*'s dramatic unconscious—and, in doing so, replicates for his audience the thematic effect of having experienced a narrative outside the boundaries of the play itself.

II. RICHARD II TO RICHARD II

What I am calling the prehistory of *Richard II* is mostly unfamiliar to readers of Shakespeare—and it is not, as mentioned above, something that can be readily inferred through *Thomas of Woodstock*. Before proceeding to its manifestation in the early modern tradition—and thus its manifestation in the mind of Shakespeare—it will be valuable to rehearse the narrative briefly, as it is currently understood by modern historians.

Richard of Bordeaux was only eleven when he assumed the English throne in 1377.⁵ Richard's father, Edward, Prince of Wales (the legendary Black Prince) had predeceased his father Edward III in June 1376, and the death of the grandfather twelve months later thrust young Richard into the uncertain center of English medieval politics. Richard's grandfather was survived by three sons, who figure in Shakespeare's play as Gaunt, York, and the murdered Woodstock. The relationship between the new king and his royal uncles was marked by perennial cycles of tension and reconciliation. Although there was no formal regency established for the young king, the early years of his reign were guided

5. The most recent scholarly treatment of King Richard is Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997). See also Anthony Tuck, "Richard II," in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004–), <http://www.oxforddnb.com/index/23/101023499>.

by a series of “continuous counsels,” in which his uncles (particularly Gaunt and Woodstock) clashed with the courtly favorites that had already begun to populate Richard’s chamber. The conflict between Richard’s noble kin and his upstart friends, so prominent a theme in *Richard II*, took root early in his reign—and as the teenage king began to govern more actively, he further alienated the old nobility by directing power and patronage to his chamber companions, such as Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk, and Robert de Vere, Duke of Ireland.⁶

In the middle years of the 1380s, the conflict between the nobility and the favorites erupted violently, setting a precedent that would come to haunt the rest of Richard’s reign. In 1386, John of Gaunt had waged war on the continent, in pursuit of a Lancastrian claim to the Castilian throne; in his absence, the English nobility found guidance in Woodstock, the most irascible and stubborn of Richard’s royal uncles. With the blessing of the commons, who were equally troubled by Richard’s minions, Woodstock moved against the favorites in the so-called Wonderful Parliament of 1386, demanding (most notably) the arrest of Lord Chancellor de la Pole for embezzlement and mismanagement. Despite his initial resistance, Richard was eventually forced by Woodstock (according to some historians, under the threat of deposition) to yield his ground; de la Pole was indeed removed from office but was shielded from further prosecution by Richard’s pardon. The shake-up, however, continued: to prevent further financial corruption, Parliament placed the exchequer in the hands of a one-year commission, whose control of the great and privy seals ensured a stranglehold on official government business. Humiliated, King Richard spent 1387 touring his realm, effectively banished from any role in governance.

The king, however, would not suffer such indignation lightly, and throughout 1387 he consulted a series of jurists about the legality of the Wonderful Parliament. Under the leadership of Chief Justice Robert Tresilian, the judges informed Richard that the proceedings of the previous year were a treasonous affront to the royal prerogative. The nobles, however, soon struck again: not long after Richard’s return to London, Woodstock and his allies presented the king with formal charges of treason against five of his favorites, including de la Pole and de Vere. The battle lines were now drawn, and both sides readied for combat. The noble party, which would come to be termed the Lords Appellant, included senior members Woodstock, Arundel, and Warwick, as well as the young Earls of Derby and Nottingham, better known in *Richard II* as Boling-

6. In his early years, Richard’s household was largely occupied by former favorites of the Black Prince, such as Sir Simon Burley and Aubrey de Vere (uncle of Robert). After the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381, however, Richard assumed more authority and began to surround himself with men of his own choosing.

broke and Mowbray.⁷ In December, the noble army soundly defeated de Vere's royalist forces at Radcot Bridge, and the Lords Appellant assumed unopposed control of the government.

The following year, the lords formalized the destruction of Richard's favorites, in what would come to be known as the Merciless Parliament. With the assent of the commons, the Lords Appellant orchestrated the eradication of the minions, and the bloody proceedings were destined to become a watershed moment in Richard's reign. Though de la Pole and de Vere had recently fled the country, they were sentenced to death in exile; the favorites that were under Appellant control, such as Tresilian, were summarily executed, and many of the king's chamber knights were similarly put to death. Even the judges were not spared: for their collaboration with Richard in 1387, they were deemed traitors and banished to Ireland. After this purge, Richard soon found his powers restored; with the unpopular favorites removed, the Lords Appellant gradually yielded their control of the government, and Richard ceremoniously assumed full sovereignty in May 1389, at the arrival of his majority. Although Richard came to terms with the Appellants—and though Gaunt's return to England provided a stabilizing noble influence—the king did not forget the indignity, which would a decade later initiate the sequence of events that culminated in Woodstock's murder.

Though unmentioned in Shakespeare's play, the events of the Merciless Parliament nonetheless provide a central context for the opening of *Richard II*. The move against Woodstock was historically a part of a much broader attack against the nobility, in which Richard—now at the height of his power—happily destroyed those most responsible for his former humiliation. As Holinshed describes it, in July 1397, Richard suddenly moved against three of his former adversaries:

But shortlie after [the king had dined pleasantly with Woodstock] he commanded the earle marshall to apprehend the duke, which incontinentlie was doone according to the kings appointment. . . . The same euening that the king departed from London towards Plashie, to apprehend the duke of Glocester, the earle of Rutland and the earle of Kent were sent with a great number of men of armes and archers to arrest the erle of Arundell; which was doone easilie inough, by reason that the said earle was trained with faire words at the kings hands, till he was within his danger: where otherwise he might haue béene able to haue saued him-

7. The saga of the Lords Appellant is recounted by Anthony Goodman in *The Loyal Conspiracy: The Lords Appellant under Richard II* (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1971).

selfe, and deliuered his fréends. The earle of Warwike was taken, and committed to the tower the same day that the king had willed him to dinner, and shewed him verie good countenance.⁸

Each lord was taken by surprise; Richard apparently reveled in the orchestration of his attack, which in one swoop had disarmed the three senior Lords Appellant, nearly ten years after the humiliation of 1588. From here, the historical Richard showed some of the theatrical sense so prominent in his Shakespearean counterpart: in September, the three lords were convicted in the so-called Revenge Parliament, a series of proceedings that modern historians have called a “deliberate imitation of the procedure of the Merciless Parliament.”⁹ The tables were turned, and the appellants of 1388 were now at Richard’s mercy. Woodstock was dispatched secretly in Calais, weeks before the parliament had convened; Arundel was executed at Tower Hill, and Warwick was forever banished.¹⁰ Bolingbroke and Mowbray, all the while, anxiously looked on as Richard took revenge on the senior lords, wondering if they would face a similar fate.

III. READING SHAKESPEARE READING RICHARD

For the historian, it is impossible to account for Woodstock’s murder without recourse to the reciprocal bloodletting of the Merciless and Revenge Parliaments; this is not the case for Shakespeare, who engaged his source material strategically, maximizing the dramaturgical power of Woodstock’s death with a technique of partial opacity.¹¹ I do think, however, it quite unlikely that Shakespeare was not aware of the longer narrative that predates the events of his play,

8. Raphael Holinshed, *Holinshed’s Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 6 vols. (London, 1807–8): 2:837–38. Subsequent quotations refer to vol. 2.

9. Saul, *Richard II*, 378. See also Matthew Giancarlo, “Murder, Lies, and Storytelling: The Manipulation of Justice(s) in the Parliaments of 1397 and 1399,” *Speculum* 77, no. 1 (2002): 76–112.

10. It is often suggested by historians that the presence of Woodstock, who was still popular with the commons, would disrupt the stage-managed proceedings; Holinshed describes how Richard commissioned “armed men and archers in their best arraie” to forestall a potential uprising (*Holinshed’s Chronicles*, 838). John Stow, however, implies the archers’ obvious coercive utility in Richard’s kangaroo court: “The Kings Archers, in number four thousand, compassed the Parliament house, thinking there had bin in the house some broyle or fighting, with their bowes bent, their arrowes set in them, and drawing, readie to shoote, to the terrour of all that were there.” See Stow, *The chronicles of England from Brute vnto this present yeare of Christ* (London, 1580; STC 23333), 521.

11. There is, of course, far more scholarship on the sources (and probable sources) of *Richard II* than I can possibly summarize here. See, e.g., Yun-Cheol Kim, “Shakespeare’s Unhistorical Inventions and Deviations from Holinshed, and Their Dramatic Functions in *Richard II*,” *Journal of English Language and Literature* 35, no. 4 (1989): 747–58; Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed’s Chronicles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Lister M. Matheson, “English Chronicle Contexts for Shakespeare’s Death of *Richard II*,” in *From Page to Performance: Essays in Early English Drama*, ed. John A. Alford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 195–219; and Jeremy Lopez, “Eating *Richard II*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 36 (2008): 207–28.

as the historical tradition he inherits insistently refers to the cycles of violence that culminated in Woodstock's murder. Though Holinshed comments little on the causal connection between 1397 and 1388, several of Shakespeare's sources (and probable sources) are explicit about the parallelism, and even a cursory glance into the circumstances of Woodstock's death would point a curious playwright toward the long sequence of events that culminated in Richard's sudden action against Woodstock, Warwick, and Arundel.¹² Based on the nature of the sources, it is my contention that Shakespeare must have known the narrative preceding Woodstock's death, at least as it is presented in the early modern historical tradition. But the fact that it does not appear explicitly in *Richard II*—and the fact that it still does, I will argue, implicitly inform the play's atmospheric properties—makes the Woodstock affair a discrete compositional moment in which we can observe Shakespeare's method of translating his sources into dramatic form, including, in this case, the reimagination of source material deemed narratively burdensome but thematically valuable.

But before turning to the interpretive significance of this prehistory, the first task is to establish Shakespeare's probable encounter with it. Could an early modern playwright, gathering data for a treatment of Richard II's reign, have avoided seeing how the intrigue surrounding Woodstock's death emerged from a long series of antecedent events? The precise nature of the Renaissance historical tradition makes this very unlikely—even if that playwright was determined to do no reading whatsoever about these prior events themselves. The earliest accounts of King Richard's reign link Woodstock's death with the Lords Appellant saga, and this association is continued by the early modern sources that underpin *Richard II*.¹³ Contemporary medieval chronicles were clear about the king's motives in 1397: the Monk of Elvesham, for example, notes Richard's "desire to exact revenge for the bitter rebuke which he had endured," while Thomas of Walsingham refers to the king's "long-cherished hope to revenge himself upon the lords."¹⁴

But more importantly, this explanation of events is recorded in a number of widely available sixteenth-century sources. If Shakespeare consulted the chroni-

12. Source attribution, it need not be said, always involves a degree of uncertainty. For a survey of *Richard II*'s probable sources, see Forker, *Richard II*, 123–65.

13. For a wonderful recent study of King Richard in the Elizabethan chronicle tradition, see Sandra Logan, *Text/Events in Early Modern England* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).

14. Chris Given-Wilson has collected contemporary accounts of Richard's final years in *Chronicles of the Revolution, 1397–1400: The Reign of Richard II* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 55, 73. The *Kirkstall Chronicler* is perhaps most explicit: "In the year of grace 1397 . . . King Richard, remembering and again recalling to mind the injustices which had been inflicted upon himself and his kingdom by a number of English lords in the year of Christ 1388, determined to right those injustices" (*ibid.*, 94).

cle of Froissart, for example, he would have encountered a reading of Woodstock's downfall that is punctuated with reminders of the Merciless Parliament. When discussing the prelude to Woodstock's arrest, Froissart makes sure to list the bloodshed of 1388 among his crimes: "This duke had caused in Englande to be done many cruell and hasty jugementes, for he had caused to be beheeded withoute tytell of any good reasone, that noble knyght syr Symon Burle, and dyvers other of the kynges counsayle, and chased out of Englande . . . the duke of Irelande."¹⁵ Even more importantly, Froissart concludes his treatment of Woodstock's death by associating the duke's undoing with his savagery earlier in the reign: "[After hearing of Woodstock's death, Londoners] toke to recorde his cruell dedes, by the duke of Irelande, whom he had exyled out of Englande; also of the deth of that valyant knight sir Symon Burle, and of sir Robert Trivyllien, sir Nicholas Bramble, sir Johan Standysshe, and dyvers other. The dukes dethe was but lytell regarded in Englande, excepte but with suche as were of his opinyon. Thus this duke dyed in Calais."¹⁶ Shakespeare could have found a more obvious cue in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, in which the reanimated Woodstock explicitly attributes his demise to the vengeance of his royal nephew.¹⁷ As Woodstock explains, the events of the Merciless Parliament—in which "Sum with shorte proces were banyshyt the lande, / Sum executyd with capytall payne" (lines 127–28)—set off the sequence that would ultimately culminate in his murder:

The king enflamed with indignacion,
That to suche bondage he should be brought,
Suppressyng the yre of his inwarde thought:
Studied nought els but howe that he myght
Be highly reuenged of his high dispight.¹⁸

At barely 200 lines, the *Mirror's* Woodstock poem leaves little room for doubt: though "openly in shewe made he no semblaunt" (line 150), Richard carefully measured his vengeance, waiting to strike until "the kinges fauour in semyng

15. William Paton Ker, ed., *The Chronicle of Froissart, Translated Out of French by Sir John Bouchier, Lord Berners* (London: David Nutt, 1901–3), 6:260.

16. *Ibid.*, 298–99.

17. I have argued elsewhere that scholars have underestimated the extent to which revenge was a central theme of Elizabethan drama, quite apart from the specific subgenre of revenge tragedy; accordingly, it is not surprising that Shakespeare would seek to exploit the dramatic potential of this revenge narrative. See Bradley J. Irish, "Vengeance, Various: Revenge before Kyd in Early Elizabethan Drama," *Early Theatre* 12, no. 2 (2009): 117–34.

18. William Baldwin, "Thomas, Duke of Gloucester," in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, ed. Lily B. Campbell (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1960), lines 127–28, 136–40.

was gained, / All olde dyspleasures forgyuen and forgotten" (lines 164–65). In fact, for the writers of the *Mirror*, the political import of Woodstock's tale centers on the theme of cyclical revenge:

For blood axeth blood as guerdon dewe,
 And vengeance for vengeance is iust rewarde,
 O ryghteous God thy iudgementes are true,
 For looke what measure we other awarde,
 The same for vs agayne is preparte:
 Take heed ye princes by examples past,
 Blood wyll haue blood, eyther fyrst or last.

(Lines 197–203)

Even within the didactic context of the collection, these concluding lines demonstrate how easily the events of Woodstock's life could be seen to fulfill a symbolic pattern of reciprocity and redoublement: Woodstock is undone by the same bloody mechanisms that enabled his ascendancy, and his murder is underwritten by his brutality against Richard's favorites. If, as is usually assumed, Shakespeare consulted the *Mirror* in his composition of *Richard II*, he would have found there an account of Woodstock's fall insistently connected to the events of the Merciless Parliament.

In the historical accounts of early modern England, the cause of Woodstock's murder is also a central contention in the feud between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, the facts of which are not entirely clear in *Richard II*. Following Holinshed, Shakespeare leaves the origins of the quarrel obscure, and Mowbray's role in the murder of Woodstock is only the climax of Bolingbroke's long list of accusations. In general, however, the Renaissance chronicle tradition is more explicit in linking the Mowbray/Bolingbroke feud to King Richard's attacks against the Lords Appellant in the Revenge Parliament. Their quarrel, it seems, erupted during the final session of those proceedings, leaving insufficient occasion to settle the matter there—hence the king's oblique reference, in the opening lines of *Richard II*, to "the boist'rous late appeal— / Which then our leisure would not let us hear" (I.I.4–5).¹⁹ What Shakespeare deftly sidesteps, however, is the fact that the origin of the conflict is intimately

19. The so-called Shrewsbury Session occurred in January 1398. From Holinshed, Shakespeare would have known that the feud had an immediate temporal association with the Revenge Parliament: "for so it fell out, that in this parlement holden at Shrewsburie, Henrie duke of Hereford accused Thomas Mowbraie duke of Norfolke, of certeine words which he should vtter in talke had betwixt them, as they rode together latelie before betwixt London and Brainford, sounding highlie to the kings dishonor" (*Holinshed's Chronicles*, 844).

connected to the long history of the Lords Appellant and the Merciless Parliament, events that proved unnecessary for his own dramatic purposes.

Apart from Holinshed, *Richard II*'s source tradition makes clear that the Bolingbroke/Mowbray quarrel sprang from questionable comments concerning Richard's treatment of the nobility, in direct response to the downfall of Arundel, Warwick, and Woodstock. Although the chronicles differ in significant detail—in the majority of Shakespeare's sources, it is Mowbray who first accuses Bolingbroke—they are unambiguous in attributing the conflict to the atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion that followed Richard's attack against their fellow lords.²⁰ In the historical narrative, it is hardly surprising that both Bolingbroke and Mowbray would be troubled by the proceedings of the Revenge Parliament; after watching the ruin of the three senior Lords Appellant, they could only wonder if their own destruction was next.²¹ In fact, in the medieval chronicle tradition, the "treasonous" comments that sparked the conflict concerned the king's alleged plan to murder them both: in the *Vita Ricardi Secundi*, Mowbray tells Bolingbroke that Richard "will seek to destroy us," while in the *Continuatio Eulogii*, Mowbray claims that "The king has ordered you and me to be killed, because we rode with the duke of Gloucester."²² Although this account was sometimes altered in the Renaissance chronicles—the specific threat becomes a general lament about Richard's treatment of the nobility, and the comments are attributed to Bolingbroke, not Mowbray—the form of the

20. Historically, it seems that Mowbray made the comments, and Bolingbroke informed; the Renaissance tradition generally reverses these roles. By following Holinshed, Shakespeare stumbled into historical accuracy.

21. As Saul notes, Bolingbroke and Mowbray had "a clear interest in limiting the scale of the counter-revolution for fear of their own role in events ten years before being called into question" (*Richard II*, 380). In the *Chronique De La Traison Et Mort De Richart Deux Roy Dengleterre*, another probable Shakespearean source, Mowbray explicitly connects his own fate with that of the senior Lords: when he and Bolingbroke are both banished, he remarks that "We might as well have gone to the great Parliament at Shrewsbury, for if he and I had gone there, we should both have been put to death, as the Earl of Arundel was." See the edition of Benjamin Williams (London, 1846), 158.

22. See Given-Wilson, *Chronicles*, 62, 68. Incidentally, a medieval chronicle also gives further explanation for one of the most puzzling items in *Richard II*, Mowbray's admission (adapted from *Holinshed's Chronicles*) that he "Once did . . . lay an ambush" for Gaunt's life (1.1.137). According to Adam of Usk, the panicked Mowbray "laid snares of death against the duke of Lancaster," apparently after it became clear that Bolingbroke had told his father of Mowbray's remarks, and that both were planning to take the matter to the king. See *Chronicon Adæ De Usk, A.D. 1377–1421*, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson (London: Henry Frowde, 1904), 169, and Chris Given-Wilson, *The Chronicle of Adam Usk, 1377–1421* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 49. Though there's no evidence to suggest that Shakespeare knew this particular context, it is quite interesting that the mysterious attack against Gaunt is not an isolated incident, but instead occurred as a direct response to the Mowbray-Bolingbroke quarrel. For the history of this event, see Chris Given-Wilson, "Richard II, Edward II, and the Lancastrian Inheritance," *English Historical Review* 109, no. 432 (1994): 553–71.

story inherited by Shakespeare still associates the origin of the conflict with the fallout of the Revenge Parliament.

If Shakespeare did not infer this correlation from Holinshed, he would have found it expressed explicitly elsewhere in his reading. Edward Hall invokes Bolingbroke's complaint as the inaugural moment of his history of Lancaster and York: "Wherefore on a daie beeyng in the compaigny of Thomas Mowbrey firste duke of Norffolke and erle Marshall, beganne to breake his mynde to hym more for dolour and lamentacion, then for malice or displeasure, rehersyng howe that kyng Richarde litle esteemed and lesse regarded the nobles and Princes of his realme, and as muche as laie in hym soughte occasions, inuented causes and practised priuely howe to destroye the more part of them: to some thretenyng death, to other manacyng exile and banishment."²³ Although Hall does not unpack Bolingbroke's assertion, it clearly refers to the recent fate of Arundel, Warwick, and Gloucester. In Froissart, Bolingbroke similarly laments Richard's attack against the lords: "Wyll he drive out of Englande all the noble men? Within a whyle there shal be none left: it semeth clerely that he wyllleth nat the augmentacyon of his realme."²⁴ Finally, in addition to such chronicle sources, Bolingbroke's complaint finds similar expression in the literary tradition. *The Mirror for Magistrates*, for example, repeats this account:

For when this Henry Erle of Harforde sawe,
What spoyle the kyng made of the noble blood,
And that without all Iustice, cause, or lawe:
To suffer him so he thought not sure nor good.²⁵

This sentiment is echoed in Samuel Daniel's *The Civil Wars*, which describes how Bolingbroke "Vtters the passion which he could not holde / Concerning these oppressions" before being betrayed by Mowbray.²⁶

Unlike what is portrayed in *Richard II*, sixteenth-century historians and poets offer a clear account of the feud's origins: the conflict between Bolingbroke and Mowbray emerged as a specific reaction to Richard's movement against their fellow lords in 1397 and out of fear that the two remaining members of the Lords

23. Edward Hall, *The vnion of the two noble and illustre famelies of Lancastre [and] Yorke* (London, 1548; STC 12722), fol. 2.

24. Ker, *Chronicle of Froissart*, 6:307.

25. Baldwin, "Lord Mowbray," in *The Mirror For Magistrates*, lines 99–102.

26. Samuel Daniel, *The Civil Wars*, ed. Laurence Michel (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1958), 1:59.4–5. In Daniel's account, it is in the aftermath of the Revenge Parliament that Richard descends into tyranny; after the lords are dispatched, the unencumbered king becomes "like a Lion that escapes his boundes" (1.56.1).

Appellant would be next on the chopping block. But it did not serve Shakespeare's purpose to expose the root so barely. In blurring the combatants' motives—as Bolingbroke swings through a litany of charges, including the famous assertion that Mowbray sparked “all the treasons for these eighteen years”—Shakespeare thickens his scene's thematic atmosphere while avoiding a burdensome narrative regression into the early years of King Richard's reign (1.1.95). This, we will see now, was his compositional strategy with the Woodstock material more generally.

IV. SILENCING THE PAST

Although usually ignored in the discussion of Shakespeare's play, these early events of Richard's reign are, I think, of central importance to our understanding of *Richard II*'s opening movement. Theoretically, this prehistory could help to clarify many of the more obscure moments in the play's opening sequence, such as the mystery surrounding Woodstock's death and the precise circumstances of the Mowbray/Bolingbroke feud. Why, then, does Shakespeare choose to omit this material? It seems a matter of dramatic economy: Woodstock's history is too complex to include in an already demanding first act, and the payoff for specificity and clarity in the matter would not be worth sacrificing narrative focus. Lacking a judicious way to employ this antecedent narrative, Shakespeare instead devises a shrewd alternative: he makes this compositional dilemma a feature of his dramaturgy by emphasizing the (historically accurate, it seems safe to say) impossibility of speaking truthfully about Woodstock in Richard's court. By insisting on this cloud of suspicion and paranoia, Shakespeare side-steps a narrative crux while intensifying the elements of doubt and mystery that serve the larger purposes of his opening sequence. Shakespeare found good dramaturgical reason to suppress Woodstock's full history—and thus, so does Bolingbroke in his initial moments on stage.

To this end, *Richard II*'s opening scene is rich in moments that develop this technique of oblique communication and indirection, designed to intensify the dramatic moment and cloak Shakespeare's compositional work-around.²⁷ To begin, the Mowbray/Bolingbroke conflict is presented obscurely; as Gaunt reminds, it is difficult to “sift” the true substance of Bolingbroke's charge, and the subsequent explanations are not satisfactory (1.1.12). Because both men are constrained by their mutual need to efface King Richard's culpability in Woodstock's death—Bolingbroke cannot articulate the full terms of his accusation, while Mowbray is

27. For a discussion of how speech is enabled and restrained in *Richard II*, see Paula Blank, “Speaking Freely about *Richard II*,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 96, no. 3 (1997): 327–48.

denied the ability to justify his deeds—it is not surprising that they are eager to discard language for the certainty of arms: Bolingbroke strives to show that what “my tongue speaks my right-drawn sword may prove” (I.I.46), while Mowbray rejects “the trial of a woman’s war, / The bitter clamour of two eager tongues” (I.I.48–49).²⁸ Mowbray, the thankless architect of Woodstock’s death, is particularly constrained; as he notes to Richard, “the fair reverence of your highness curbs me / From giving reins and spurs to my free speech” (I.I.54–55). The King’s assurance that “Free speech and fearless I to thee allow” (I.I.123) does not free Mowbray from his linguistic bind, and his notoriously vague claim that “I slew him not, but to my own disgrace / Neglected my sworn duty in that case” suggests the extent to which obliqueness rules the day in Richard’s court (I.I.133–34).²⁹ King Richard’s innocence is the enabling fiction that generates the entire encounter—although all parties are aware of the king’s culpability, this unutterable truth forces both Mowbray and Bolingbroke to redirect their grievances to one another, each of whom functions separately as a proxy for Richard (Henry in blood; Mowbray in deed). It is this context of indirection and inarticulation that gives a special force to Bolingbroke’s central vow, the restoration of a voice to the “tongueless” Woodstock (I.I.105).

To underscore the verbal constraint of Richard’s court, Shakespeare stages two scenes in which the truth about Woodstock’s murder can be expressed—though they both occur, tellingly, within a rhetorical context that is insulated from the open air of public political discourse. Embedded within act I, the Duchess of Gloucester is first able to voice the grievance that Bolingbroke could only imply at court, and her impassioned plea to Gaunt serves as the natural counterpoint to the atmosphere of constraint that suffocates the rest of the act. Although Gaunt—the pillar of orthodoxy who “may never lift / An angry arm” against the anointed king (I.2.40–41)—must passively resign himself to the eventual triumph of heavenly justice, this approach does little to quench the bloodthirstiness of Woodstock’s widow.³⁰ In this invented scene,

28. The opening sequence, however, is not simply concerned with restraining speech: King Richard’s infamous interruption(s) also defuses the immediate threat of physical violence in the court. Leonard Barkan notes that, in the play’s beginning, “much of the dramatic power results from the confrontation between passion or violence and some sort of chilling force bent on their suppression”; see his “The Theatrical Consistency of *Richard II*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1978): 5–19, at 7.

29. Larry S. Champion notes the ambiguity of Mowbray’s admission, attributing it to Shakespeare’s increasingly confident handling of his chronicle sources. See “The Function of Mowbray: Shakespeare’s Maturing Artistry in *Richard II*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (1975): 3–7.

30. Gaunt’s opening line (“Alas, the part I had in Woodstock’s blood”) is curious. Though traditionally glossed as an expression of kinship, it may also contain a more sinister sense: as Shakespeare would be aware from *Holinshed’s Chronicles*, Gaunt served as Lord High Steward at

Shakespeare finds means to engage Woodstock's prehistory without compromising the structural integrity of the play at hand: instead of treating the narrative background of Woodstock's murder, which poses too complex a challenge for its minimal payoff, Shakespeare elects to have the Duchess focus on its ethical status. In doing so, he transplants the thematic and affective lexicon of the Woodstock saga—the emphasis on cycles of bloody revenge, and the toil they take on all involved—into the new, dramatically consistent context of the duchess's speech.³¹ This strategy reflects Shakespeare's general engagement with the prehistory of his play: in strategically repressing its narrative content, he nonetheless preserves much of its larger essence.

We find another example in Gaunt's famed deathbed scene, the other instance in which the truth about Woodstock's death is openly expressed.³² This nonhistorical scene again manages to channel the thematic energy of the play's prehistory, by epitomizing what is perhaps the central conflict of Richard's entire reign: friction between the headstrong king and his royal uncles. As Shakespeare recalls here, proverbial tradition affords special privilege to a person's final words, and impending death grants Gaunt the freedom of speech that was impossible in Richard's court.

And unsurprisingly, the death of Woodstock fuels much of Gaunt's speech, both implicitly and explicitly. Gaunt's central premise, that "England that was wont to conquer others / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself" (2.1.65–66), amplifies the fratricidal energy unleashed by Woodstock's death; just as Richard's murder of Woodstock is reflexive, so too has the entire realm become self-consuming. When Gaunt addresses his royal nephew, he emphasizes this genealogical implosion by channeling the ghost of Edward III:

O, had thy grandsire with a prophet's eye
 Seen how his son's son should destroy his sons,
 From forth thy reach he would have laid thy shame
 Deposing thee before thou wert possessed,
 Which art possessed now to depose thyself.

(2.1.104–8)

the Revenge Parliament, helping to convict Arundel, Warwick, and Woodstock (in absentia). See *Holinshed's Chronicles*, 841.

31. We need not assume, with Rossiter (*Woodstock*, 234), that the revenge theme in the Duchess's speech is a carryover from her small part in *Woodstock* 5.3. See n. 17.

32. For treatments of this famous speech, see Donald M. Friedman, "John of Gaunt and the Rhetoric of Frustration," *ELH* 43, no. 3 (1976): 279–99; George D. Gopen, "Private Grief into Public Action: The Rhetoric of John of Gaunt in *Richard II*," *Studies in Philology* 84, no. 3 (1987): 338–62; and Harry Berger Jr., "Ars Moriendi in Progress, or John of Gaunt and the Practice of Strategic Dying," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 1, no. 1 (1987): 39–65.

The vision of preemptive deposition suggests the extent to which King Richard has warped the natural order; as Gaunt has wrenched the boundaries of time to achieve his image, Richard has analogously perverted the primal obligations of kinship. Infuriated by such presumption, the King lashes out, excusing Gaunt on the same grounds of affinity:

Were thou not brother to great Edward's son,
 This tongue that runs so roundly in thy head
 Should run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders!
 (2.1.121–23)

Fatally misjudging his ethos, Richard seems unaware that this ironic appeal will only enable the climax of Gaunt's prophecy. No longer restrained by his consular duties, the dying man seizes the rhetorical freedom to reverse Richard's own words and condemn the King of Woodstock's death:

O, spare me not, my brother Edward's son,
 For that I was his father Edward's son.
 That blood already, like the pelican,
 Hast thou tapped out and drunkenly caroused.
 My brother Gloucester, plain well-meaning soul—
 Whom fair befall in heaven 'mongst happy souls!—
 May be a precedent and witness good
 That thou respect'st not spilling Edward's blood.
 (2.1.124–31)

Liberated by his newfound prophet's voice, Gaunt is finally able to mouth publicly the silent subtext of genealogical betrayal that had shaped the course of the first two acts. Although we are shortly told, after Richard's callous dismissal of his uncle, that Gaunt's "tongue is now a stringless instrument," it is precisely because he has nothing left to say—on his deathbed the duke finally unites his obligations both as a subject and as kinsman, in a virtuoso rhetorical display that shatters the play's previous investments in silence and paranoia (2.1.149).

In his famed speech, Gaunt at last reveals his intense proximity to Woodstock, who in the chronicle tradition often occupies the monitory, paternal role assigned to Gaunt by Shakespeare. As French notes, Richard's eventual usurpation of Gaunt's estate "is tantamount to yet another murder," and there is a sense in which Gaunt and Woodstock here occupy something of an overlapping position—a doubling anticipated by the duchess's cry for revenge, which

elaborately traces Gaunt's affinity with his murdered brother.³³ In fact, Shakespeare's portrayal of Gaunt has long been thought to resemble the Woodstock of the anonymous play—a suggestion, if nothing else, of their proximity in the larger historical tradition of King Richard's reign. Again, we find Shakespeare channeling the energy of *Richard II*'s prehistory, even as he translates it into a form that can be easily apprehended by his audience, without recourse to material outside the play itself. In Shakespeare's hands, Gaunt thus defers his own silence long enough to fulfill Bolingbroke's promise to restore a voice to the tongueless Woodstock.

In the conclusion of this scene, we find a final set of examples that link the two noble uncles. Reacting to Gaunt's death, Ross, Willoughby, and Northumberland offer another catalog of Richard's tyrannies—a response that (at least to my mind) proves that Shakespeare had encountered the narrative background of Woodstock's murder, as it adopts passages from Holinshed that are explicit in their treatment of this ancillary historical context. For example, among his list of Richard's transgressions, Ross reports his “fin[ing]” of the “nobles” for “ancient quarrels” (2.1.247–48). Although Shakespeare chooses not to elaborate, Holinshed is less obscure in his rendition of the moment: “Moreouer, this yeare he caused seuentene shires of the realme by waie of putting them to their fines to paie no small summes of monie, for redéeing their offenses, that they had aided the duke of Glocester, the earles of Arundell, and Warwike, when they had rose in armor against him. The nobles, gentlemen, and commons of those shires were inforced also to recieue a new oth to assure the king of their fidelitie in time to come.”³⁴ Thus, the “ancient quarrels” that Shakespeare invokes refer directly to the Lord Appellant uprising of 1387, the precursor to both the Merciless and the Revenge Parliaments. It is not surprising that Shakespeare opts not to explain further; consistent with his earlier practice, he chooses to suppress the details of this attack against the nobility, in order to avoid introducing superfluous matter. But the adoption of this passage suggests that Shakespeare must have been aware of the historical narrative that predated the events staged in his play: it was staring at him right on the page.

An even more telling example, however, lies behind Northumberland's assertion that Richard has “basely yielded upon compromise / That which his ancestors achieved with blows” (2.1.253–54). The inspiration for these lines seems to have come from a much earlier moment in Holinshed, which depicts Woodstock's furious opposition to Richard's plans to cede the town of Brest to the French in 1597: “Thus as they fell into reasoning of this matter, the duke

33. French, “Woodstock Murder,” 341.

34. Holinshed's *Chronicles*, 849.

said to the king: 'Sir, your grace ought to put your bodie in paine to win a strong hold or towne by feats of war, yer you take vpon you to sell or deliuer anie towne or strong hold gotten with great aduenture by the manhood and policie of your noble progenitours.'³⁵ In Holinshed's account, the tension over Brest was the culmination of the long feud between Woodstock and the king: shortly after, the lords were arrested, and the stage was set for Richard's Revenge Parliament. Though perhaps a forgettable moment in the entire Woodstock saga, this evidence is nonetheless crucial, for it suggests that Shakespeare was familiar enough with the details of the Woodstock prehistory to transplant phrasing from a minor episode into the new (and thematically appropriate) context of Northumberland's speech. Even more interestingly, Woodstock's complaint has a curious intertextual life in Holinshed: when threatening the king with deposition in 1386 (during the Wonderful Parliament), Woodstock had similarly suggested that Richard "call to remembrance, how his noble progenitour king Edward the third, his grandfather, and prince Edward his father had trauelled in heat and cold, with great anguish and troubles incessantlie, to make a conquest of France."³⁶ Although there is no way to know if Shakespeare had read so deeply into Richard's reign, the echo suggests how easily the thematic essence of the play's prehistory could be integrated into Shakespeare's treatment of later events.

Ultimately, of course, such uncertainty can never be eliminated from something as speculative as a source study, and this problem is compounded when considering a case as puzzling and obscure as the purpose of Woodstock in *Richard II*. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that Shakespeare had encountered the larger narrative surrounding Woodstock's death and that his sophisticated engagement with this material could not have derived solely from the largely nonhistorical *Thomas of Woodstock*. As I have suggested, the prehistory of Richard's reign elucidates the two central mysteries of the play's first half: the circumstances of Woodstock's murder and the origin of the Mowbray-Bolingbroke feud. This material, it seems, presented a major compositional challenge to Shakespeare: though the rise and fall of the Lords Appellant was the central backdrop to the early events of his play, Shakespeare could not incorporate the unwieldy historical sequence of the Merciless and Revenge Parliaments without unnecessarily complicating an already complex play. To cover this obscurity, Shakespeare transformed his dramaturgical necessity into a thematic motif: in *Richard II*'s playworld, the past cannot be spoken about openly, and it is thus only parceled out piecemeal, in rare moments of free speech by the Duch-

35. Ibid., 834-35.

36. Ibid., 775.

ess and Gaunt. Though he sidesteps the narrative content of Richard's early reign, Shakespeare nonetheless preserves its atmospheric integrity, by adopting a large part of the play's thematic agenda from this prehistory: the seemingly endless, recurrent conflict between Richard and his nobility, as well as the emphasis on cyclical revenge. For Shakespeare's audience, an understanding of *Richard II* was not contingent on a prior viewing of *Woodstock* nor on an assumed familiarity with Holinshed. The obscurity of the play's opening replicates the atmosphere of King Richard's court, just as it replicates the experience of the playwright, wading through the mire of a complex and difficult history.